Chapter 7
Rachel Fritsch / Megan Dennis

Brand Culture:
The Images and Spaces of Consumption

Introduction

"The ideology of freedom has been monetized"; Patriotism and free will have come to be associated with the "right to buy" in Brand Culture. Culture is now represented by consumption; the right to produce and the right to consume. While the illusion of choice is present, the consumer serves as a wheel in the capitalist machine.

In their book, "Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things", Scott Lash and Celia Lury explain how commodity culture was transformed in the twenty-first century. Lash and Lury propose that culture now operates through things, rather than through symbols and representations, texts and images. Things serve as media through which culture is transmitted, they propose, and media become things. Whereas previously markets were organized around the production and circulation of commodities, today brands—entities that acquire value through experience—serve this function.

Sarah Banet-Weiser states that modern life and relationships are "understood and expressed through the language of branding"; culture itself is branded to the point where it can be labeled and sold, forcing consumers to find their identities through material goods. She also discusses "consumer citizenship", in which nationalism and social acceptance is associated with buying popular products, and staying up-to-date on brand culture.

Ex: *Toms* was launched as a "lifestyle brand" that promised to donate to various charities with each purchase, offering the consumer an added incentive of feeling they did something "good" by buying the product. Wearing the shoes becomes an act of humanitarianism, and the consumer aligns purchasing *Toms* products with contributing to society. Association between humanitarianism and corporate culture has become more publicized with the rise of internet culture, and many modern brands make efforts to be viewed publicly as ethical and charitable, regardless of their actual employee policies.

Our data, the food we eat, and most every material good the modern consumer uses is a part of brand culture. In the digital age, it is possible for companies to advertise in almost every aspect of daily life, and thus brand culture becomes inescapable. Brand culture acts as a food chain, and the average consumer serves as a single part of that food chain.

Brands as Image, Symbol, and Icon

Culture now operates through things, rather than icons, symbols, and representation.
Advertising was a lead contributor to the rise of brands' commodity consumption.
This advertising included imagery, slogans, and iconic symbols which lead consumers to buy into a certain ideology that the product can provide them with.

Ex: Pears soap in the nineteenth century used cute images of babies bathing along with the slogan, “Have You Used Pears Soap Today?”. Consumers buying the product agree to buying into the ideology of cleanliness. This engaged in the era’s ethos of cleanliness being next to godliness. The image of the baby was used to evoke the idea of purity and innocence.
Images and slogans pushed companies to involve artists and designers in the manufacturing process, employing painters, illustrators, etc.

Today brands are beyond just imagery; media text produced by artists. They are integrated into our culture. They have effects and meanings that become a part of an experience, both economically and emotionally.

Brands signify with signs that consumers engage with, use, remake and appropriate. “Loving a brand” is often discussed and a goal of a company's marketing plan. “Brands are often equated with feelings of belonging, authenticity, patriotism, and community– all important aspects of one's emotional and civic life that are unlikely to be fulfilled by a consumer product.” But yet products are presented as the bridge to emotionally connecting people together and hold the power to strengthen nations.

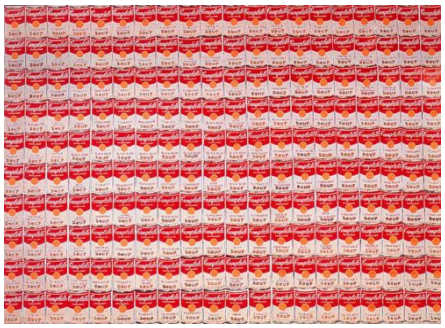
Hank Willis Thomas Is a conceptual artist that focuses on themes related to identity, history and popular culture. In his series *Branded* he discusses the origins of the word branding and connects them to a time in history > slavery - branding the flesh of an animal or human.
Thomas talks about the connection between product branding and black culture.

EX. His piece *Scarred Chest* speaks to not only “loving of a brand” (consumer devotion) but the violence of embodied commodification. Specifically, he critiques the marketing of the high-end athletic wear to middle class white communities, and the involvement of young urban black consumers used during advertising, to convey the message of “street cred” being sold to white suburban consumers.
This merges of brand meaning and one’s life.

Ex: Apple markets itself as an extension to one's life. iPads and iPhones are marketed as a device that extends the consumer's identity into social media and entertainment purposes. Apple products become a part of the consumer identity.

"**Pseudoindividuality** -refers to the ways that cultural forms can define and interpellate viewer-consumer-users as individuals, when in fact they are selling homogeneous experiences."

Identity is no longer simply signified by a brand; rather, identity is the product that we consume when we engage with a brand, whether we consume the brand as information, image, or product. Branding has become not just a way of selling goods, but an inescapable mode of everyday communication. p263

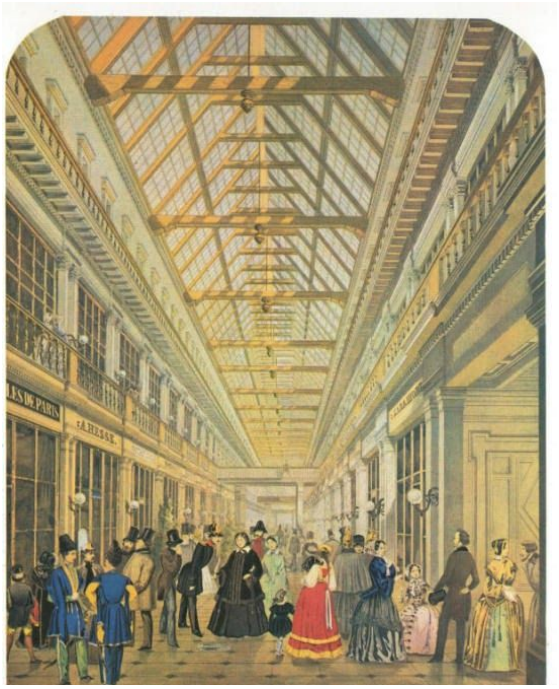


Pop art: used advertising to bridge the gap between low culture and high culture often using images which were considered low culture and turning them into fine art.

Artists such as Andy Warhol challenged popular culture and mass production through their art "both celebrating the aesthetic of repetition in mass culture and to question the boundaries between art and product design."

The Spaces of Modern Consumerism

Consumerism has evolved in order to transform the act of shopping into a leisure activity or pastime, rather than a necessary function. Malls and shopping centers are carefully designed in order to create an enticing atmosphere, mimicking the careful design and branding behind modern products aimed at individualizing corporations and attracting consumers.



Shopping arcades served as early western malls; large, enclosed spaces in which the consumer is confined within a space of consumption, and the viewing of advertisement and branding is as much a part of the experience as the actual shopping.

Walter Benjamin, a social critic, described these arcades as the essence of modernity and capitalist culture. He was also fascinated by the flaneur, a figure described by writers as a man who takes leisure in the passive act of observing the modern landscape.

Luxury-themed department stores emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, described by writer Emile Zola as “cathedrals of commerce”. The late nineteenth century brought to the rise of the flaneuse, the female window shopper; since women were allowed to roam the streets alone for the first time. Writers such as Ann Friedberg describe window shopping as a capitalist tool aimed to generate desire for products and consumption, a further example of companies turning shopping into a leisure activity.

Friedberg noted that, as the automobile became more widely accessible to the modern consumer and various roads and highway systems were built post-World War II, the consumer’s leisurely, passive gaze shifted to a more demanding and fast-paced standard of consumption. Companies took advantage of the new means of travel in order to find new means of advertising, and mail-order catalogues became popular, encouraging the act of convenient consumption without having to leave the home. Billboards became widespread and were designed to catch the eye of the consumer quickly during travel.

The automobile became a symbol of “individualism, freedom, and conspicuous consumption”, and buying into this culture was seen as a mandatory act of nationalism. Lizabeth Cohen describes a “consumers’ republic”, in which the act of prescribing to the social trends of consumption is necessary to gain a sense of personal freedom, identity, and belonging to society. Cohen notes that the majority of twentieth-century advertising focused on the image of the white, upper-middle class suburban family, while any black characters were stereotyped or placed into a role of subservience or domestic labor.

The 1950’s saw the rise of television advertising, a trend that shifted to become one of the most prevalent aspects of brand culture. Advertising shifted in the late twentieth century to target more specific audiences and become more exploitative and eye-catching. Disney’s *Frozen* serves as an example of brand culture, in which the movie was used to sell hundreds of different forms of merchandise; including branded food, clothing, school supplies, bath products, and more.

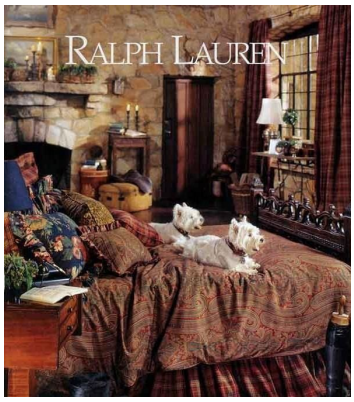
The ethos of brand culture can be found in a psychological need for the consumer to find a form of emotional fulfillment and social acceptance in the act of consumption, a symptom of capitalism and modern society.

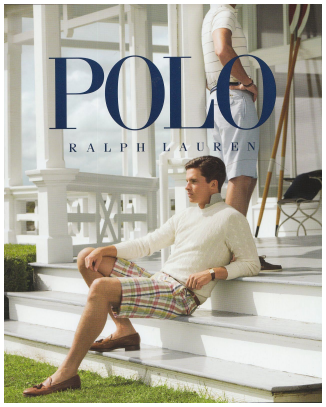
Brand Ideologies

Brands produce desire by selling ideologies to its consumers whether it's beauty, self-image, better relationships with others and self, fulfillment, popularity,etc. Brands sell stories that consumers want to inhabit. False promises keeping consumers on a never-ending chase for more.

In the early eighteenth-century, advertising was text-based for things such as rum, spices, other kitchen goods. Slave advertisements also became common. appearing next to goods and real estate. It wasn't until the end of the nineteenth that brands began to gain brand identities with the use of slogans and imagery specific to that company.

The twentieth century brought color printing of images and the merging of text and image to create a narrative which led to better advertisement.





Ralph Lauren was able to capitalize through selling a brand ideology, and by the 1990s RL was known for their brand culture of classy luxury at an affordable cost, for the middle-class man. A consumer could build their world with this brand culture of high-class luxury from RL bedding, to RL wall paint. Essentially the consumer buying into RL brand ideology.

Individual Choice is tied to the right to consume, the desire for a product and not just solely a need or an investment, but more for a desire of status and symbolic cultural capital.

Ex: Cell phones/ laptops/ tech. Many consumers replace fully functioning devices for new and "updated" versions. The pressure is intense to keep up with the ever-changing designs.

Therefore, advertising must also change with the time constantly, even products that embody tradition and heritage. **Ex**. Quaker Oats

1960s- Manufacturing factories began to be “offshored” moving these factories to other countries essential wanting to separate and bring distance between producer and consumer.

“As production became less visible to consumers, consumption was stripped of the reality-checking ethical potential inherent in living with or close to those who work hard and are paid low wages to produce the goods and services we consume.”

T.J. Jackson Lears talks about **therapeutic ethos** as it responds to the middle classes desire to buy a ‘better life’. Advertising promoted to the middle class and lower class was a concept of a soul fulfillment that was attainable and necessary through consumption

Ex: home and auto insurance sells peace of mind.

Advertising and brand cultures rely on cultural health and well-being, targeting communities of lower class. At one point, sodas and soft drinks were marketed as health tonics.Coca-Cola in the nineteenth-century, advertised that it could relieve physical and mental exhaustion. Saying it “adds life”, targeting poor, nutritionally compromised consumers.

Nestlé advertised that its baby formula was ultimately better for the child than the mother’s breast milk. It was more expensive than breast milk, but consumers did not mind. They wanted to give their child the best. This false advertising led to the death and malnutrition of babies whose mothers couldn’t afford the amount of formula it took to sustain their babies' health.

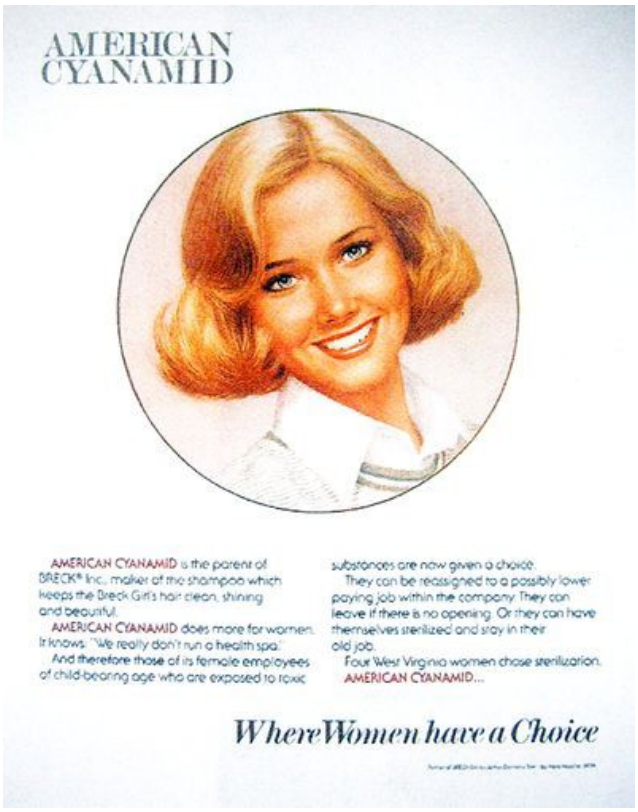
Commodity Fetishism and the Rise of the Knowing Consumer

Marxist theory, although written in the 19th century, is the most common theory through which modern scholars critique capitalism. Though Marx couldn’t have predicted the age of the

internet, and how modern advertising means have changed and become even further integrated into everyday life, his critique on “exchange value” (in which items are inflated in price beyond their material worth due to social convention) is even further applicable in the 21st century. Brands like *Supreme* sell $1000 sweatshirts that would cost less than $20 at any department store; the price serves as a status symbol. The more unobtainable a product is, the more desirable it becomes to the consumer.

Commodity fetishism refers to the means in which brands strip items of their original context and present a new “origin story” for the product. Many high-end clothing brands, advertised as “all-American” companies, utilize sweatshops and child labor overseas, then claim ignorance if they are exposed. The product is associated with the brand in the eye of the average consumer, and the labor behind that product is purposefully ignored. Very few “Made in America” products are produced entirely in the U.S. In most cases, these products are assembled in the U.S. from parts made cheaply overseas.

Consumers play as much of a role in commodity fetishism as corporations. Corporations advertise in order to present their goods in a carefully designed way, but the consumer chooses to buy into this image. Amazon was recently exposed in underpaying their employees, not allowing bathroom breaks and setting unrealistic expectations for laborers. Yet Jeff Bezos remains the richest man in the world because Amazon has become so imbedded in the life of the modern consumer that most of us see it as a necessity.



Hans Haacke created a series of pieces in the 1970’s addressing commodity fetishism. One of his more popular pieces parodied the Breck shampoo ad campaign and featured the model they used in their ads. In the piece, Haacke critiques Breck’s labor practices; specifically, the choice given to female workers in the company exposed to harmful chemicals of either being reassigned to a lower-paying job, leaving, or being sterilized. This work was one of the first instances of appropriation or parody being used as a means to critique commodity fetishism and consumer culture.

Later labeled as “culture jamming”, this practice of mimicking or “hijacking” popular ad campaigns in order to spread an adverse message has become more popular in the late 20th and early 21st century. *(Situationist origins)* Most social critiques of the 20th century centered around the culture of consumerism and the

means in which brand culture has become an unquestionable factor in contemporary society. Corporations constantly seek to stay up-to-date on the latest trends, the language and interests of the youth, and pop culture in order to establish relevance.

Even social movements like Black Lives Matter are appropriated for advertisement's sake. Last year's Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner exemplifies a corporation using disenfranchised groups as a means to promote their own brand. Corporations use commodity fetishism to their advantage, promoting the image they want associated with their brand and hoping the consumer won't attempt to "peel back the curtain" and look into the origin of the product. It is the responsibility of the "knowing consumer" not to choose ignorance, and to take responsibility in learning the source of the products they buy.

Social Awareness and the Selling of Humanitarianism

"Marketers attach meanings of social responsibility, civic engagement, environmentalism, and feminism to particular brands, so that their meaning transcends the particular product."
Social awareness is a key factor for mainstream business marketing and profiling, selling meanings and "brand culture" and activism that their products cannot achieve or solve.
This is a form of commodity fetishism/selling brands as an idea or lifestyle.

commodity fetishism is the perception of certain relationships (especially production and exchange) not as relationships among people, but as social relationships among things (the money and commodities exchanged in market trade).

Ex: Nike, selling athletic ability / Apple, an extension of self-identity / Starbucks, sophisticated dining / Coca-Cola, youthful lifestyle

Green marketing - social awareness advertising
Green marketing was a trend that brands often used attaching eco-consciousness to their brand. Commodity fetishism allows products that aren't even good for the environment to be labeled as green.

Ex: Chevron, an oil company, ran a global campaign called "People Do". They would attach their logo to environmental projects– even though the campaign was referring to what individuals can do for the environment as opposed to big corporations.

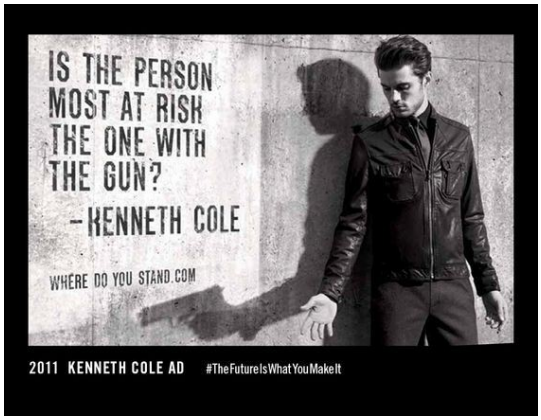
Chevron was able to sell itself as a green company even though it's one of the worst environmental offenders. Chevron launched other campaigns such as "We Agree" which was to show that this company was socially aware, concerned, and empathetic.

The *Yes Men* impersonated Chevron and created ads that took the company's responsibility a lot further. *(bottom right image)* It eventually derailed Chevron's million-dollar campaign.

Social responsibility and the fashion industry

Brands often run campaigns that go beyond their brand meaning and spark social conversations about world issues; ads that speak to a certain social issue but also sell the brands products.

Ex: Kenneth Cole, a high-end fashion brand often speaks to social issues such as gun control, gay rights, abortion and war while still selling his products. "By using our brand to discuss relevant social issues, we have made an effort to build a connection to others to promote not just what they look like on the outside but who they are on the inside." - Cole



Social Media, Consumer Data, and the Changing Spaces of Consumption

Advertisement has evolved, encompassing every aspect of daily life; from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. Even if we learn to ignore pop-up ads on our phones and billboards on the highway, brands work hard tracking consumer data to find new ways to target potential customers.

The “spaces of consumerism” are also changing. While former examples of brand culture included shopping centers and malls, buildings designed for leisure and for the act of looking, most modern commerce is done through the internet. Thus, many brands have shifted their focus from physical advertisement to ads on YouTube, Facebook, and other major social media websites. Social media and the use of the internet, particularly smartphones, has become so ingrained in the daily lives of most consumers that advertisements become inescapable.

Increased consumer demand for more convenient shopping methods, in addition to an increasingly more competitive corporate landscape, has led to a decline in traditional department stores and retailers, and a huge boom in online commerce. Operating solely online allows brands such as Amazon to craft whatever image they want to present to their customers, further promoting a culture of commodity fetishism. The convenience outweighs whatever ethical issues may be behind the product in the eyes of the average consumer. When one can click a button and receive a package the next day, it’s easy to forget the human labor that is behind that delivery.

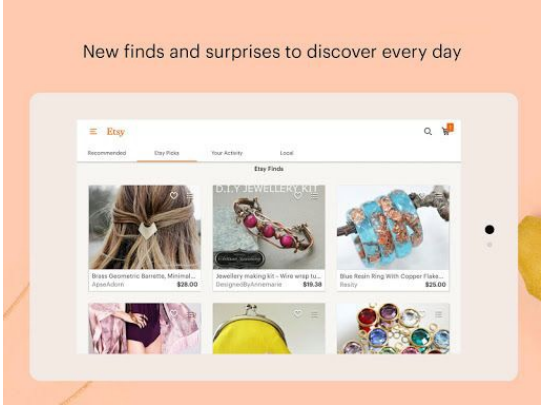
Increased globalization of brands advertised as American can lead to problems, specifically when chain stores occupy spaces formerly run by local businesses that failed due to similar corporations. The late 20th and early 21st century has seen a growing trend of small businesses being forced out of business due to large retailers. Corporate consolidation has made space for an economy where fewer and fewer companies are controlling more of and more of the corporate landscape.

The shifting of advertisement to the internet in the age of smartphones has allowed companies to track the online browsing patterns, purchasing habits, and similar data of the consumer. In the digital age, the consumer is constantly being “watched”; brands constantly find new means of accessing and recording consumer data, and many social media websites use this to their advantage, profiting from selling user data. Nicole Cohen writes about a “valorization of surveillance”, and the means in which social media has normalized corporate collection of consumer information.

Guerrilla Marketing refers to tactics used by brands in order to disguise advertising as advice from a fellow consumer. Bar patrons paid to recommend a specific drink exemplifies a real-world application of this concept, but social media sites provide even easier spaces for this. Meme pages on Instagram and social influencers can be paid for promotion by large brands without audiences even being aware they're being advertised to. A large group of “Beauty Gurus” on YouTube were criticized years ago for promoting cheaply made makeup products in their tutorials, without telling their audiences that they were being paid by the companies they were promoting. The term **prosumer** refers to a consumer not directly involved with a brand, but who unknowingly helps promote a brand through their online activity.

DIY Culture, the Share Economy and New Entrepreneurism

Social media platforms helped with the rise of alternative spaces for consumers to experience shopping in a different light far away from large department stores that lack aesthetic qualities. The 2000s brought small businesses and independent retailers that specialize in upcycling handmade items as well as recycling vintage items.



Shared economy

These businesses thrive off of consumers who seek to shop small and support their locally or globally niche taste cultures. Consumers who want to get away from the big box stores and buy more consciously. These brick-and-

mortar businesses often follow a neoliberal business model– a shared economy and transparency between consumer and producer.

Ex: Etsy is an ecommerce platform allows consumers to shop locally but globally bridging those boundaries between consumer and producer. Allowing for a much more personalized shopping experience.

Ex. Amazon / Ebay

“"**Neoliberalism**" is contemporarily used to refer to market-oriented reform policies such as "eliminating price controls, deregulating capital markets, lowering trade barriers" and reducing state influence in the economy, especially through privatization and austerity.”

Ex: Airbnb minimizes the role of the business itself and prides itself on creating a global community that involves thriftiness and new personalized experiences. Users are able to occupy both ends of the relationship the business is designed for; consumer or “host” producer.

Companies like these rely heavily on the review-culture from the users. Trust between these businesses and their users are what keep the company operating. For example, companies like Uber rely on the trust of their users; “an Uber rider is prompted to rate the drive. Those reviews build user trust and create an image of the service as continually vetted.” In return, this becomes free advertising for the company to generate its own reputation as well as free labor from users through these reviews.

21st century brand culture; a shift from goods to services as the central commodity.